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NEWS

‘Left in the dark’: First responders sound alarm as Lorain County ends Cleveland Communications radio lease

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Major construction surrounding the switch to MARCS — new towers, shelters, fencing and electrical work —should be finished by the end of August, with equipment installation and testing in September and October. Getty Images





By [Hannah Drown, cleveland.com](#)

ELYRIA, Ohio — Lorain County Commissioners voted last week to end their lease with Cleveland Communications Inc. — the latest flashpoint in a two-year fight over how first responders in the county communicate and the county's transition to the Ohio MARCS radio system.

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It started in December 2022, when Lorain County Commissioners approved a \$7.7 million contract with CCI, a plan backed strongly by fire and police chiefs as well as the sheriff's office. After a new slate of commissioners took office in 2023, however, the board voted to rescind the deal, arguing it had not been properly bid. Instead, they chose to join the Ohio MARCS system, a move projected to cost the county more than \$17 million over 20 years, but with the state covering \$10 million in maintenance and upgrades through 2044, according to The Chronicle-Telegram.

That reversal sparked backlash from police and fire leaders throughout the county and a lawsuit from CCI that remains active today. Chiefs say the Ohio MARCS system — built largely on Motorola equipment — is less reliable inside buildings than the CCI system, according to The Chronicle-Telegram. However, the county contends the switch will ultimately save taxpayers \$15 million and deliver a superior system.

Those tensions resurfaced at last week's Lorain County Commissioners meeting. Sheffield Police Chief William Visalden, who is also president of the Lorain County Chiefs of Police Association, warned that he had heard "serious concern" in recent days that the tower serving local agencies could be dismantled.



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"It directly affects Sheffield Village, Sheffield Lake, Lorain and Elyria," Visalden said. "I understand, and we understand, that you guys are in control of that, however, we would like to have some conversations."

Visalden added that police and fire leaders feel "left in the dark" about decisions that could impact the safety of residents, law enforcement officers and first responders.

Commissioner Jeff Riddell tried to calm fears, stressing the tower isn't being torn down and service won't be interrupted during the transition. He said the 60-day termination notice was procedural ahead of the Oct. 20 contract renewal deadline.

"This is part of implementing and getting ready to put into operation the MARCS system," Riddell said. "We are not tearing the tower down and at this point we are not interrupting the service, but the vendor knew this day was coming and he had an obligation to his customers to provide a plan B, so we assumed that he's doing that."

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Lorain County issued a press release last week about the county's switch to the Trunked Radio System through Ohio MARCS. It detailed major construction — new towers, shelters, fencing and electrical work —that should be finished by the end of August, with equipment installation and testing in September and October. Public safety agencies will be invited to take part in in-building field testing to confirm coverage and system performance.

CCI, meanwhile, asked for a sit-down with commissioners, to discuss a possible contract extension, just 90 minutes before the commissioners' meeting began. Riddell said that it was too early to predict the outcome of those talks.

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